Higher Education, Skills and Work-based Learning

Work-based learning for the creative industries – A case study of the development of BA (Hons) Web Design and Social Media

Abstract

In the summer of 2014 Ravensbourne, a UK university sector institution specialising in the fields of design and digital media, was invited by Creative Skillset, industry skills body for the Creative Industries, to explore the development of a work-based learning (WBL) degree through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) Catalyst Fund. Requirements of the funding stipulated that, in addition to WBL provision, the course should be offered as a two-year fast-track degree. This was required to help reduce the increased financial burden placed on students, which arose from the substantial rise in HE tuition fees sanctioned by the UK coalition government in 2010. Subsequently, the newly elected Conservative government have pledged to substantially increase the number of apprenticeships in the UK through funding initiatives. This has placed a greater emphasis on the Higher Apprenticeship programme and need to develop WBL programmes.

The development and composition of Ravensbourne's WBL model was adapted from an existing and successful three-year, traditionally structured, BA (Hons.) Web Media Production course. The new course adopts a model whereby partnerships between external organisations and educational institutions are established through a contractual agreement (Boud and Solomon, 2001). Throughout the development process this WBL model of learning was revealed to be appealing to both employers and students within this sector. From the employers' perspective, it provides them with an appropriately skilled workforce that addresses the technical and digital skills gap, one of the most challenging areas of recruitment, enabling them to use "work-based degrees to 'upskill' and meet shortages in [their] companies and/or sectors" (Guile and Evans, 2010:15). From a students' standpoint the advantages are clear; they learn their chosen subject while gaining industry experience in the workplace and earn a salary. It also enables them to produce a graduation portfolio of work that includes 'real life' projects.

However, while these responses were encouraging, a number of practical issues and academic challenges occurred that need careful scrutiny. The growth of the web

industry, while rapid, is still embryonic. Consequently many employers, particularly in social media, remain small or micro businesses, capable of only employing one student. This caused several accumulative and administrative issues along with funding implications.

Therefore, this article presents a case study detailing the insight and knowledge gained throughout this process of exploration. Alongside the advantages and pitfalls of integrating WBL into sometimes fledgling but rapidly expanding creative industries, such as web media production and social media, it provides insight into the development of WBL in creative and vocationally orientated subjects relating to content creation and digital media practices. These are crucial areas for expansion as higher-level degree apprenticeships are rolled out in the UK.

1.0 Current landscape of higher education in the UK

Since the turn of the millennium there has been a proliferation in the use of digital technologies in the workplace along with an exponential growth of hi-tech industries. This has necessitated an urgent requirement for a digitally literate and skilled workforce in the UK, which has guided government, industry, education institutions and individuals to consider different forms of learning provision and funding models. 'Higher and Degree Apprenticeships' (Skills Funding Agency, 2014) have been presented as the way forward by the Coalition and Conservative governments. Before looking directly at these plans, some background exploration is needed to explain why these new models of learning have been proposed and the Government's educational shift towards a greater emphasis on apprenticeships.

1.1 Student funding and loan repayments

The funding of higher education in the UK has been a highly contested issue that has shifted significantly over the last 20 years. Although one might consider student loans in the UK to have been a fairly recent occurrence, they were in fact introduced into the Higher Education system back in 1990, replacing maintenance grants. These earlier loans agreements were mortgage-like in their repayment methods and used for the purposes of maintenance while at university. In 1998 the Labour government initiated a different kind of funding model to assist in its ambition to increase university enrolment. Known as Income Contingent Repayment loans, they were determined by income and not by amount owed. Along with this they controversially

instigated tuition fees for under- and post-graduate students across the UK. Originally set at a limit of £1000, the limit was tripled to £3,000 in 2004[1].

Shortly after the formation of the Coalition government in 2010 reforms were introduced to English undergraduate finances, which included the tripling of the cap on university tuition fees from £3,000 to a maximum of £9,000 per year. Consequently 76 per cent, 130 out of 172 universities and colleges, charged the upper limit of £9,000 for at least one course in 2015-16 (Office for Fair Access, 2014). This has greatly affected the cost of university education in the UK and the amount of student debt incurred over the life of an average three-year degree course. As a result, there were protests against such an exponential increase in fees and burden of incurred debt (Coughlan, 2010). The individual's student debt is repaid over the course of the following 30 years, as with the previous loan scheme, after finishing university. The threshold where loan repayments began was raised on income over £21,000 per year (previously set at £15,000 in 2005/06). After this 30-year period any unpaid debt would be written off.

In the 2015 spending review and autumn statement Osborne announced the introduction of an employer levy to raise £3 billion by 2019-20 (HM Treasury, 2015:15) to help fund apprenticeships. This, and the cuts to the Further Education budget, is the clearest indication the government has shifted emphasis and focus towards apprenticeships.

1.2 UK Skills gap

There are other areas for consideration within the current economic climate, such as the increasing skills gap between what students learn at university and what employers need, particularly in high tech and digital areas. From an international perspective, figures released by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2015) indicate that the skills gap in the UK is wider than other developed countries. A workforce survey of 3,000 companies by the British Chamber of Commerce (2014) found that 88% of businesses believe school leavers are unprepared for the world of work and 54% consider graduates unprepared for the workplace. Crucially, with regards to work-based learning, more than three quarters of companies (76%) consider a lack of work experience is the reason young people are ill-equipped for work. The report states that, "stronger links must be formed

[1] Since 2005 Scotland has adopted a different funding model through The Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council (SFC).

between educators (schools, colleges and universities) and business to better prepare young people for work" (ibid.).

Digital skills and proficiency are an essential part of modern businesses and this is set to continue as a surge in digital technologies proliferates throughout all industries and workplaces. A House of Lords Select Committee on Digital Skills states that there is 'a shortage of medium- and high-level digital skills in the UK. This needs immediate attention if the UK is to remain competitive globally' (2015:44). To remain internationally competitive, the Committee argues, that the UK must ensure it has the necessary pool of digitally-skilled graduates (the 'digital makers') at the higher level. Amongst the recommendations, the committee proposes that universities need to be:

> encouraged to work in partnership with industry, to make sure relevant courses are aligned with employer needs (ibid.:59). […] Immediate industry involvement to enhance the education and training agenda is vital to make sure the UK's workforce can adapt to the requirements of the new world (ibid.:68).

In addition, the committee states that universities could better serve prospective students by adding the option of shorter, more flexible provision to its existing course (ibid.:59).

From a UK-industry viewpoint, the lack of sufficiently skilled, digitally proficient workforce is already a concern and there are fears over a looming digital skills gap. Southworth Industries founder Benjamin Southworth argues that the UK is in danger of creating a lost generation of young people; ill equipped with the skills they need to succeed in the modern workplace. If not addressed Southworth considers these issues as posing a real threat to the future of the UK economy (Southworth, 2015). Experian analysis of Office for National Statistics (ONS) and Tech Partnership (2015) data revealed that the UK currently requires 134,000 new tech specialists every year, with around half of these at a junior level. The data found that two in five companies struggle to fill vacancies, 85 per cent of them cited the skills shortage for their difficulty in recruitment. According to the analysis employers are increasingly turning to apprenticeships to fill the ever-increasing tech skills gap in the UK.

A Government press release recently claimed that in 2013 the creative industries accounted for 1.7 million jobs in 2013, 5.6 per cent of UK jobs and is now worth £76.9 billion per year to the UK economy (Department for Culture Media & Sport, 2015). Therefore, a constant stream of emerging young talent is vital for the creative industries and digital economy particularly in the web and social media sector, which has seen substantial growth in 'tech hubs', such as East London Tech City.

2.0 Higher education and creative careers

Historically UK higher education institutions have played a crucial role in finding, skilling and nurturing talent for the creative industries. Research by Universities UK (2010) suggest that 16 per cent of the UK student population is involved in courses significant to the creative economy and that Universities are:

> increasingly embedding opportunities for practical learning in industry settings within their courses as a way of enhancing the employability of graduates and creating value for participating organisations (ibid.:vi).

However, despite the close links between universities and industries, studying for a degree related to the creative industries 'rarely provides an expectation or understanding of what is required in vocational contexts' (Guile, 2010:470). One of the challenges of linking education with creative work 'remains the gap between employer and industry norms, and the expectations and the understandings of such creative employment that students are able to gain through their degree' (Ashton, 2015:399).

Two distinguishing discourses co-exist: workplace learning, where learning is unconcern with qualifications, and work-based learning, where learning has some accreditation. The later can have the effect of making the transition from education to work emphasised unduly on the accumulation of qualifications rather than the development of vocational practice (Guile, 2009:775).

Recognising the relationship between creative education and creative work can be as much about understanding broader and more general overlaps and intersections with education and work (Ashton, 2015:399). Indeed, the 'Creative Trident' methodology model, which measures creative employment, demonstrates that more creative workers are employed in non-creative sectors (embedded) than are found as specialists inside the creative industries sectors. This supports the perception that creative activity is important throughout the economy (Cunningham, 2014).

Research conducted in to vocational education and training and implementation of innovation in the mining, solar energy and computer games sectors by University of Western Australia suggests that:

> firms innovate; not individuals. This means that a focus on the innovation abilities of individuals by education and training researchers, practitioners and policy people may miss the actual skills development needs of employers.

> What firms need are people with skills that accord with the firm's organisation, structures and activities (Robert Dalitz et al., 2011:154).

This implies that the curriculum design of vocational learning and industry collaboration will be defined by changing structure of industries.

Before moving to the case study it is necessary at this point to give some background description of the government proposals for the Higher and Degree Apprenticeships.

3.0 Government proposals and initiatives

3.1 Higher or Degree Apprenticeships

Higher Apprenticeships, although appearing similar to elements of work-based learning must adhere to the government's strictly set criteria and are, therefore, less flexible. They cover academic and vocational qualifications and learning from levels 4 and 5 but can continue up to bachelors and masters degrees at levels 6 and 7 respectively.

Degree Apprenticeships (level 6), the level of the Web Design and Social Media course, differ from Higher Apprenticeships as they offer a degree as an integral part of the apprenticeship.

> Degree apprenticeships combine both higher and vocational education and fully test both the wider occupational competence and academic learning, either using a fully-integrated degree co-designed by employers and HEIs, or using a degree plus separate end-test of professional competence (Skills Funding Agency, 2015a:1).

The advantage is that while earning a wage and getting real work experience in their chosen profession, they also gain a full bachelor's or master's degree from a university.

As a way of countering the rising amount of publicly-owned student debt the government have ruled that Higher or Degree Apprenticeships are not eligible for student loans and that, 'as with all apprenticeships, apprentices must not pay the costs of training or assessment and should not be charged student fees within their apprenticeship' (ibid.:4). One of the ways of giving employers subsidy towards the cost of employing apprentices is through the Trailblazers programme.

3.3 Trailblazers

In 2014 the UK government initiated the 'Trailblazer' programme designed primarily to encourage potential employers to fund and develop apprenticeships programmes both within organisations and in partnership with further and higher education institutions. The initiative was developed in response to *The Richard Review* (2012) commissioned by BIS. This led to the publication of The *Future of Apprenticeships in England: Implementation Plan* (HM Government, 2013), setting out key measures that aim to 'put employers in the driving seat'. By simplifying the apprenticeship system with new employer-designed standards the intention is to increasing the quality of apprenticeships. BIS want to give employers 'purchasing power' by putting control of government funding for the external training of apprentices in the hands of employers. For employers to be signed up to the Trailblazers programme employers submit, either individually or as a group, an Expressions of Interest (EOIs) bid. If accepted the employer (the Trailblazer henceforth) designs the standards, assessment and costing plans for their own job sector for approval. If successful The Trailblazer receives funding and the delivery phase can commence. Government funding, as of 31st July 2015, was £2 for every £1 of employer investment, up to the maximum cap (Skills Funding Agency, 2015b). The intended outcome of this process is that apprenticeships are of higher quality and more relevant to the employer's industry. However, the head of Ofsted, Sir Michael Wilshaw, criticised apprenticeship providers claiming they accredit low-level skills and provide poor quality qualifications and that they are wasting taxpayer money (Jamieson, 2015).

4.0 Case study: Exploration and development of a work-based learning programme for BA (Hons) Web Design and Social Media

4.0.1 Introduction

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funded the project through its Catalyst Fund, a fund that commits up to £45 million annually 'to drive innovation in the HE sector, enhance excellence and efficiency in HE, and support innovative solutions' (HEFCE, 2014a). The project, *Exploring Higher Apprenticeships in HE*, was developed by Southampton Solent University in association with Creative Skillset. The primary objective was to support the development and promotion of 'seven new Higher Apprenticeship (HA) degree programmes during a twelve-month

pilot phase with an additional three months for research and evaluation' (HEFCE, 2014b). Additionally the project's aim was to establish and continue to explore the role of universities in higher apprenticeship development (Anderson et al., 2012).

4.1 Course development and structure

Development and composition of Ravensbourne's WBL model was adapted from an existing and successful three-year, traditionally structured, BA (Hons.) Web Media Production course. Initiation of the new course, *Web Design and Social Media*, reflects the rapid growth of social media-orientated jobs and companies within the industry and to give the course a broader appeal, which advances the declaration of Stuart Cosgrove, Director of Creative Diversity at Channel 4, that:

> web-delivered media, interactive games and mobile technologies are areas where education, research and the wider content industries can do more positive work together (quoted in Universities UK, 2010:iii).

To meet the swift turn-a-round assigned to the project, and the comparatively lengthy process of developing standards and frameworks, describe later, development was conducted outside the Trailblazer programme. This meant the funding model would be a combination of apprenticeship salary from the employer and student loan. The employer would pay for the work placement and the student for their tuition fees. This was a bridge between traditional and Trailblazer models and meant that the size of loan would be lower due to the two-year fast-track degree.

Due to the dual trajectory of the course, condensing three years of study into two and incorporation of a work-based learning element, a number of changes were need to the structure of the traditional undergraduate degree. Consequently, each year of the course is extended to four terms, with the fourth term running over the summer period when students on three-year traditional courses would be on summer break. The programme is designed to be academically front-loaded and timetabling paced to reflect the work-based learning element (see Fig. 1). Creating four terms per calendar year ensures that students progress effectively in accelerated mode. This is in keeping with the full-time working status of WBL apprentices.

The philosophy underpinning the course development relates to the delivery of provision for individuals who are interested in a new model of degree-level learning: intensive, work-based, blended delivery. The course is designed to appeal to individuals looking for a non-traditional student experience. Nonetheless, the course retains the same amount of university-orientated learning as a three-year traditionally

delivered degree course (levels 4, 5 and 6). Course work engages with theory and practice through embedded theoretical learning outcomes in practical project work.

4.1.1 Boot camps

Another necessary introduction to the course structure is the concept of ‘boot camps’ – an intense period of learning in a higher education institution – where students are introduced to, and commence the course units. At the end of each term, students have 10–15 days of educational ‘boot camp’ sessions at Ravensbourne (see Fig. 1). This is where the initial theoretical and practice-based parts of the unit briefs are delivered, enabling the adoption of group-based projects and activities. While the student completes most of the projects during the boot camps, students can, if necessary, use any spare time during the following WBL period to finish their projects. The rest of the term is spent with their employer integrating what they have learnt.

Fig. 1 – BA (Hons) Web Design and Social Media – Timetable

Year 1

Level 1					Level 2		
Induction & pre-term	**Term 1**	**Christmas**	**Term 2**	**Easter**	**Term 3**	**Summer boot camp**	**Term 4 (summer)**
15 day boot camp	Work Based Learning 1	10 day boot camp	Work Based Learning 1	10 day boot camp	Work Based Learning 2	10 day boot camp	Work Based Learning 2
Fundamentals of Web Design		T&C + Web development workshop		Social Media cultures		Designing the User Experience	

Year 2

	Level 3					
Pre-term	**Term 1**	**Christmas**	**Term 2**	**Easter**	**Term 3**	**Term 4 (summer)**
15 day boot camp	Work Based Learning 3	10 day boot camp	Work Based Learning 3	10 day boot camp	Major Industry Project (WBL 4)	Major Industry Project (WBL 4)
Dissertation prep + Interactive Narrative		Dissertation + Advanced Web Technologies		Dissertation + Advanced Web Technologies	Final major project	Final major project

Fig. 3 shows the timetable of the two-year, four-term course and maps the university units to boot camps and shows the work-based learning units in the workplace.

4.1.2 Unit specifications

The course comprises of subject specialist units, work-based learning units and core units. Subject specialist units focus on subject specialist methodologies, technologies and processes and offers project-based learning that simulates contemporary professional practice. Knowledge and understanding of contextual and theoretical issues are delivered as an integral part of the practice based units. These units are adapted from the Web Media Production course. Some delivery is intended to be internet-based, including online learning using the Ravensbourne virtual learning environment (VLE).

Work-based learning units are unique to this course and designed to develop knowledge and understanding of the workplace, which enable the creation of live projects in a real work environment. These units encourage the skills necessary to work conceptually, critically and develop projects independently as well as within a

team. Core units additionally ensure the ability to articulate an intellectual, theoretical and critical awareness of the subject, both located in practice and in a broader context. This prevents a theory/practice dichotomy while ensuring that this aspect of learning is sufficiently weighted in the curriculum.

4.1.3 Four work-based learning modules

As previously stated, the course is academically front-loaded, which means that the WBL modules become more prominent and significant as the programme progressed. Therefore, levels 4 and 5 contained one WBL unit each, while level 6 contained two WBL units. The units are designed to build a workplace learning experience for the student that progressed from research and group projects in year one to individual and conceptual design projects in year two. The unit specifications are robust but have a broad context to allow a diversity of outcomes within the unit briefs. This is necessary to reflect the wide-range of disciplines within the subject area and the diversity of partnership employers' needs.

A summary is a follows:

- Work-based learning 1 – partnership employer research project (level 4)
- Work-based learning 2 – defined, specific task within a team (level 5)
- Work-based learning 3 – an individual task set by employer (level 6)
- Work-based learning 4 – self-directed project within company (level 6)

4.1.4 Value of work-based learning units

Aims of the WBL units are to gradually develop practical, creative and conceptualising skills that, alongside the core academic skills, form an individual capable of a high level of innovation. Thus, the four WBL units are crucial in:

- Offering a practical and intellectual vehicle through which the student can creatively explore, in depth, complex practical and intellectual ideas.
- Undertaking a personal project or projects in the workplace alongside the technical, practical and intellectual support of the university.
- Creating a significant self-directed industry project that will aid the continuation of employment with the partnership employer or aid in their quest for employment during and after graduation.

- Building a portfolio of real-world industry produced work.
- Gaining valuable experience and knowledge of working in their chosen industry.

The work-based curriculum will continue to develop in partnership with the employers, so they have equal ownership of the content. Ravensbourne will then ensure any changes meet academic standards outlined in the programme specification. Regular meetings will be held with each employer to monitor student progress and ensure progress follows agreed patterns.

4.2 Student recruitment

Skillset set the initial recruitment target at 16 students, which was expected to rise to around 25 in subsequent years. The application process was conducted through Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). Little was done in the way of marketing the course but details were available on the Ravensbourne website and in the prospectus, with the words, 'subject to validation'. Despite this, interest and applications for the course were exceptional. As of February 2015 applications had risen to 30 without the course having been validated. This was higher than the average for traditionally orientated three-year BA (Hons.) Web Media Production.

Of the 30 students that applied 26 were interviewed (four applicants failed to present themselves for interview). Interviews were conducted in three one-day sessions for ten applicants. Many of the students had design-orientated backgrounds (graphic design, layout, multi-platform branding) but not necessarily coding. They understood the importance of designing for the internet. An overwhelming proportion of candidates identified the inclusion of 'social media' in the course title as being an important enticement in applying for the course. This identified social media as a genuine field of study and practice that is attractive and of value to students. It must be noted that all candidates cited the work-based learning and fast track aspects of the course as highly appealing.

4.2.1 Interviews and applicant suitability

As envisaged at the early stages of this process, the course design must be appropriate to a person with particular educational needs. This may be an individual with some experience working in the industry, or one who wanted a different educational experience than that of a traditional student. It was also necessary to consider the needs of the employer in this procedure. Therefore, assessment of

candidate's suitability to undertake work and learning with partnership employers was vital.

The universities minimum requirements for entry – GCSE English and Maths and 2 A-Levels grade C or above, or equivalent – were observed. However, as this is a visually creative content production course, the student's portfolio of work is an important component in assessing suitability. Consequently, and in exceptional circumstances, a student with an outstanding portfolio might be given concessions and offered a place.

4.2.2 Issues arising from application process

One of the issues arising from the interview process was that both Ravensbourne and partnership employers need to interview the prospective student/apprentice. Thus, in the above scenario, although students were offered a place on the course, this was conditional on the employers accepting them as paid apprentices. Indeed, the skill of the interviewer included the ability to envisage them prospering in a workplace environment. Hence the interview process needs to be two-fold, as well as judging the suitability of the candidate for university education it is also an initial vetting system for employers. In Ravensbourne's circumstance, this was made doubly pertinent, as students could not be informed of the outcome of the interview due to the course not being validated and crucially until the partnership employers had deemed them suitable employees. Of course an alternative route to student recruitment could be to invert the process. In this case the employer might identify someone within or associated with the company that would benefit from a Degree Apprenticeship and propose him or her to Ravensbourne, needing only an 'academic' interview to gain a place.

4.3 Engaging and recruiting employers

Engaging and recruiting employers was institutionally challenging. Much of this may have been due to the new orientation and understanding of the needs of the course and the fast turnaround necessary to recruit partnership employers.

One of the main issues remains the size and diversity of the web and social media sectors. These sectors, while overlapping in skills sets, are also diverse in the range of production and content. The growth of the web industry, while rapid, is still embryonic. Consequently many employers, particularly in social media, remain small or micro business. The EU defines a micro business as less than 10 employees and turnover under £2 million (The Commission of the European Communities, 2003).

Small and micro companies we contacted were highly responsive to the concept of work-based learning and degree apprenticeships. One such example was a social media agency. The owners understood the potential benefit to their business not only from a skills basis but the theoretical knowledge gained from the university course work. They also saw it as solution to employee recruitment, which was difficult within a niche market, and the value of shaping someone to the ethos and principles of their company.

However, having predominantly micro businesses as the main partnership employers for the course creates several accumulative and administrative challenges. Firstly, the size of the businesses dictates that many employers are capable of only employing one student. Therefore, in Ravensbourne's position, it was necessary to create partnerships with at least fifteen employers to meet the student target in the period leading up to commencement of the course, a difficult task in the time frame. As the course progresses year-on-year this process that will need to be repeated every year, as it is anticipated that each (micro) partnership employer will not be in a position to recruit a new apprentice until the end of the two year course cycle. Consequently, added administrative resources will be necessary to oversee the communication and organisation of students with multiple employers. Additionally, a continuous recruitment process of new partnership employers will need to be initiated.

One area of concern for a bourgeoning digital creative sector dominated by micro businesses is the Trailblazer funding model, which requires the employer to pay both the educational tuition fee and a wage to the student/apprentice. This is potentially an expensive outlay for a fledgling business even after taking into account the two-thirds claimed back from the government. While larger companies with financial means and resources to develop the Trailblazer frameworks and standards can absorb this investment, micro businesses find joining the programme resource intensive and unaffordable due to the outlay of the learning provider fee and the apprentice's salary. Additionally, micro enterprises have to focus intensely on their core business and may be reluctant to spent time and resources developing and getting the course curriculum validated before they see a return on investment. This is a disincentive to get involved. Alongside this, the several micro businesses we approached were opposed to entering into the comparatively lengthy Trailblazers application process due to uncertainty regarding the outcome of the forthcoming general election of 2015. As the process can be lengthy to complete this was deterrent to applicants in the last two years of an electoral cycle and by the

apprehension that a change of government policy might change or terminate the programme. Therefore, within this context and at this early stage of development, the Trailblazer initiative is judged to be more suited to larger employers.

Secondly, this area of the digital creative industry is a sector where innovation and working practises change quickly and where new job specifications are constantly being defined. Due to the diversity of skills needed within the sector, some university units might not be appropriate and of value for some businesses. For example, a social media company might not need an apprentice to have advanced coding skills. This is addressed through group projects that enabled a student to be involved with a group project but specialise in his or her employer's specialist area. However, empirical evidence is need to access effectiveness of this approach.

The third issue concerns the loss of work-based learning provision while a student/apprentice is engaged at a partnership employer. While contract agreement are undertaken between learning institution, student and partnership employer, loss of provision could occur for a number of reasons, such as a dispute with the apprentice, lack of work or business failure. The latter probability is a particularly concern for micro business employers. In the event of an employer no longer being able to offer the student/apprentice work-based learning provision, attempts would be made to recruit another or an existing employer. During this period a simulated work environment would be activated, where a work-based environment is created using Ravensbourne's facilities. Alternatively, if no long-term solution could be found, the student would be offered a transfer to the (non-WBL, three year) Web Media Production course, where they can also transfer their accrued unit credits. However, this might not be agreeable to the student who has expected a work-based, paid element to their learning.

The message from the industry advisory board, which was approached for feedback on this course, confirmed that there is an urgent need to address the widening skills gap in this area of digital creative industries, and that jobs are appearing now that did not exist three years ago. Several employers suggested that individuals that came straight out of FE colleges did not have the skills they need, so they value the concept of the course more for the direct learning students get within a subject, rather than the degree, along as the curriculum can remain relevant and up-to-date. However, the issue of finding small and micro business partnerships remains a challenge.

5.0 Conclusion and discussion

While the UK education sector has seen significant transformation over the last two decades, the higher education landscape has been subjected to considerable change over the last five years. The main contributing factors have been the way universities are financed. In addition there has been a move towards market-driven solutions that have opened the higher education sector to private companies, commercial stakeholders and institutions. This has brought greater competition and introduced marketisation to the sector (Brown, 2013; McGettigan, 2013).

Many employers (particularly in the digital sector), government departments and agencies have expressed concern about an emerging digital skills gap. Evidence from government education policies and projected future spending indicate that funding is being prioritised and allocated to encourage employer partnerships. This could have grave implications for many less established or under-funded universities and further education colleges in the future, particularly if measures are not taken by these institutions to embrace the new apprenticeship model of funding.

From the background research and development of the BA (Hons) Web Design and Social Media work-based learning course, substantiated by the case study, this model of WBL, from an engagement and participation perspective, is appealing to students and small and micro business employers within the subject area. From an employers' perspective, many considered a skills gap as one of the most challenging areas of recruitment and were positive about a WBL initiative. From a students' standpoint the advantages are many: they can learn their chosen subject while gaining industry experience in the workplace and earn a wage while doing so. Additionally they have a portfolio of work that includes 'real life' projects when they graduate. They may, indeed, remain employed and gain promotion at their partnership employer after graduation.

From an integration viewpoint, the structure of WBL courses, and the use of boot camps, means that courses could be delivered without adding excessive pressure on University facilities, particularly demands for teaching space and limitations of timetabling. The benefit is that resources can be used in 'downtime' when not used by other non-WBL courses, particularly over the summer period, for example. It would also assist in optimising and maximising student intake, particularly important since lifting of the cap on full-time UK undergraduate numbers implemented by the government in 2015 (Hillman, 2014).

During the exploration and development of the course a number of issues were identified, which need further investigation. One of the primary issues encountered

during development was that Government initiatives, such as Trailblazers, rely predominantly on the involvement of large industry players. While this could be addressed with the adoption of a more focus approached targeting companies with large web and/or social media departments in need of front-end designers to enhance their online presence, this presents potential limitations of the Trailblazer model. While this model works well for the construction or aerospace sector where there are several large sized industry employers in need of a high volume of employees with precise knowledge and skills, it is less effective for small and micro business, particularly within web and social media. However, this could be mitigated by structuring curricula to embedding creative orientated students in non-creative sector apprenticeships, as identified by Cunningham (2014) and Ashton (2015).

From a higher education perspective, there were also concerns over the 'cannibalisation' of traditional courses. For example, how does the learning institution maintain equilibrium between two similar courses, where one is traditional and one is WBL, without creating an unhealthy internal market that might become competitive and self-defeating?

Although web and social media knowledge and skills are in-demand across most modern companies, the case study reveals the web and social media sector to be a small but rapidly expanding market within the creative industries containing diverse variety of niche markets and micro businesses. Therefore, a framework or strategy for addressing issues of multiple and diverse employers within one sector each employing one student on the WBL course in needed. This could amount to the involvement of 15 to 20 partnership employers each with their own niche employment and training needs and could extend beyond the creative sector, as previously stated. The challenge for universities is to develop curricula that are commensurate with all skills and development needs of all employers signed up to the programme. This might prove problematic given Robert Dalitz et al., (2011) argument that industry collaboration needs to be defined by changing structure of businesses.

Consequently, consulting with employers on how to improve the skills gap within their sector and their businesses is crucial. The development of and uses of digital technologies continues to grow exponentially and this is set to continue. Employers, particularly in the creative industries, exploit these changes commercially and swiftly and, for educators, developing courses that remain current, relevant and up-to-date is a constant challenge. Consultation, therefore, should also identify and keep

abreast of emerging employment requirements for skills and knowledge that could be incorporated into courses.

At the time of writing the course remains in development. Designs and concepts are evolving to increasing engagement and build employment partnerships with small and micro businesses that are in need of skills offered by our web and social media orientated courses. Involvement in the HEFCE Catalyst Fund and the *Exploring Higher Apprenticeships in HE* project has been a valuable experience and has provided a great deal of knowledge and insight, which I have endeavoured to convey in this article.

References

Anderson, A., Bravenboer, D. & Hemsworth, D. (2012), *The role of universities in higher apprenticeship development*. Higher Education, Skills and Work-based Learning, Media and Technology*,* 2**:**3, pp. 240-255.

Ashton, D. (2015), *Creative work careers: pathways and portfolios for the creative economy*. Journal of Education and Work*,* 28**:**4, pp. 388–406.

BCC (2014), *Young people need more support to make transition from education to work* [Online]. British Chamber of Commerce. Available: http://www.britishchambers.org.uk/press-office/press-releases/young-people-need-more-support-to-make-transition-from-education-to-work,-says-bcc.html Accessed 17th August 2015.

Boud, D. & Solomon, N. (eds.) (2001), *Work-based Learning – A New Higher Education?,* Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.

Brown, R. (2013), *Everything for Sale? The Marketisation of UK Higher Education (Research into Higher Education),* London, Routledge.

Coughlan, S. (2010), *Students stage day of protests over tuition fee rises* [Online]. BBC News. Available: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-11829102 Accessed 21st October 2015.

Cunningham, S. (2014), *Creative Labour and Its Discontents: A Reappraisal*. *In:* Hearn, G., Bridgstock, R., Goldsmith, B. & Rodgers, J. (eds.) *Creative Work Beyond the Creative Industries: Innovation, Employment and Education.* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Department for Culture Media & Sport (2015), *Creative Industries now worth £8.8 million an hour to UK economy* [Online]. Gov.uk. Available: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/creative-industries-now-worth-88-million-an-hour-to-uk-economy Accessed 22nd October 2015.

Guile, D. (2009), *Conceptualizing the transition from education to work as vocational practice: Lessons from the UK's creative and cultural sector*. British Educational Research Journal*,* 35**:**5, pp. 761-779.

Guile, D. (2010), *Learning to Work in the Creative and Cultural Sector: New Spaces, Pedagogies and Expertise*. Journal of Education Policy*,* 24**:**4, pp. 465–484.

Guile, D. & Evans, K. (2010), *Putting Knowledge to Work: Re-Contextualising Knowledge through the Design and Implementation of Work-Based Learning at Higher Education Level* [Online]. Foundation Degree Forward (FDF). Available: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/putting-knowledge-to-work.pdf Accessed 25th July 2015.

HEFCE (2014a), *Catalyst Fund* [Online]. Available: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/funding/catalyst/ Accessed 17th August 2015.

HEFCE (2014b), *Southampton Solent University* [Online]. Available: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/funding/catalyst/projects/southamptonsolent/ Accessed 17th August 2015.

Hillman, N. (2014), *A guide to the removal of student number controls* [Online]. Higher Education Policy Institute. Available: http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Clean-copy-of-SNC-paper1.pdf Accessed 15th September 2015.

HM Government (2013), *The Future of Apprenticeships in England: Implementation Plan* [Online]. HM Government. Available: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/253073/bis-13-1175-future-of-apprenticeships-in-england-implementation-plan.pdf Accessed 25th August 2015.

HM Treasury (2015), *Spending review and autumn statement 2015* [Online]. Available: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/479749/52229_Blue_Book_PU1865_Web_Accessible.pdf Accessed 27th November 2015.

House of Lords Select Committee on Digital Skills (2015), *Make or Break: The UK's Digital Future – Report of Session 2014–15*. Authority of the House of Lords.

Jamieson, S. (2015), *Sir Michael Wilshaw: End apprenticeships for making coffee and cleaning floors* [Online]. Telegraph Media Group Limited. Available: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/sophie-jamieson/11938409/Sir-Michael-Wilshaw-End-apprenticeships-for-making-coffee-and-cleaning-floors.html Accessed 18th October 2015.

McGettigan, A. (2013), *The Great University Gamble: Money, Markets & the Future of Higher Education,* London, Pluto Press.

OECD (2015), *OECD Skills Outlook 2015: Youth, Skills and Employability* [Online]. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Available: http://www.oecd.org/edu/oecd-skills-outlook-2015-9789264234178-en.htm Accessed 17th August 2015.

Office for Fair Access (2014), *Access agreements for 2015-16: key statistics and analysis* [Online]. Office for Fair Access. Available: https://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Access-agreements-for-2015-16-key-statistics-and-analysis.pdf Accessed 12th July 2016.

Richard, D. (2012), *The Richard Review of Apprenticships* [Online]. School for Start Ups. Available: http://www.schoolforstartups.co.uk/richard-review/richard-review-full.pdf Accessed 25th August 2015.

Robert Dalitz, Toner, P. & Turpin, T. (2011), *VET and the diffusion and implementation of innovation in the mining, solar energy and computer games sectors*. *In:* Curtin, P., Stanwick, J. & Beddie, F. (eds.) *Fostering enterprise: the innovation and skills nexus – research readings.* Adelaide, Australia: National Centre for Vocational Reseach.

Skills Funding Agency (2014), *Professional development for work-based learning practitioners apprenticeships* [Online]. HM Goverment. Available: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/professional-development-for-work-based-learning-practitioners-apprenticeships Accessed 24th October 2015.

Skills Funding Agency (2015a), *Higher Apprenticeship and Degree Apprenticeship Delivery from April 2015 to April 2016. Higher Education Institutions Fact Sheet March 2015 Version 1 – Revision Date 1 June 2015* [Online]. Government UK. Available: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/412019/Higher_Apprenticeship_and_Degree_Apprenticeship_Delivery_from_April_2015_to_April_2016.pdf Accessed 24th July 2015.

Skills Funding Agency (2015b), *Trailblazer Apprenticeship Funding 2014 to 2015 Requirements for Employers - Version 2* [Online]. Available: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/412179/Trailblazer_Apprenticeship_Funding_2014_to_2015_Requirements_for_Employers.pdf Accessed 25th August 2015.

Southworth, B. (2015), *A UK digital skills gap looms* [Online]. Guardian News and Media Limited Available: http://www.theguardian.com/media-network/media-network-blog/2014/aug/18/uk-youth-shortage-digital-skills Accessed 27th September 2015.

Tech Partnership (2015), *More Digital Apprentices essential to ensuring Britain's growth* [Online]. Accessed 18th August 2015.

The Commission of the European Communities (2003), *Commission Recommendation of 6 May 2003 concerning the definition of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises* [Online]. European Union. Available: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32003H0361 Accessed 23rd September 2015.

Universities UK (2010), *Creating Prosperity: the role of higher education in driving the UK's creative economy* [Online]. Universities UK. Available: http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2010/creating-prosperity-the-role-of-higher-education.pdf Accessed 12th July 2016.